CHAPTER 12

‘Spoken from the Impulse of the Moment’: Epistolarity, Sensibility, and Breath in Frances Burney’s *Evelina*

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‘Every word seemed spoke from the impulse of the moment’:[1] thus the heroine, newly arrived in London for the very first time, describes her elation after the experience of watching David Garrick act, in a letter early on in Frances Burney’s only epistolary novel, *Evelina* (1778). What impresses her so much is his capacity to perform spontaneity—to speak a written part as if ‘from the impulse of the moment’. The comment is itself a performance by the novelist of a performance of spontaneity on the part of the letter-writer—of her enthusiasm, scribbled down in the heat of the moment, on her return from the theatre—and such an impression of immediacy is a key quality of epistolary fiction of the period. Samuel Richardson’s famous phrase, ‘writing, to the moment’, encapsulated the idea of the epistolary form as peculiarly suited to the rendition of human emotion as it was felt, minute by minute, apparently unmediated by any process of recollection, revision, or censorship.[2] Evelina’s description of

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Garrick's performance focuses attention specifically on the act of speech and what prompts it (or appears to do so); in the use of the word 'impulse' she hints at an important nexus of relationships between breath, the heart, and the motivations behind human action that this essay will explore. The meanings of 'impulse' encompass the beating of the heart, the idea of sudden and unreflective action, and, more archaically, the influence of the spirit.[3] Questions of physiology, emotion, and moral decision-making are brought together in the word, as they are frequently in the sentimental epistolary novel of the period and in *Evelina* itself.

Drawing out these aspects of Burney's novel illuminates the neglected role of breath in the mapping and understanding of eighteenth-century sensibility. Sensibility has been studied in terms of the senses, the significance of the heart has been examined, and, above all, the centrality of developing ideas about the nervous system has been scrutinised, but breath in its multiple aspects and significances has not received the specific attention it deserves.[4] Yet in even a cursory consideration of the distinguishing features of the sentimental protagonist, her (and, though less frequently, his) sighs, tears, and swoons would suggest that breath and its disruptions are central to the physiological manifestations and emotional impact of sensibility. The sentimental text is typically written with acute regard for the ebbs and flows of its protagonists' feelings, fluctuations that are often mirrored in the speed or loss of breath, factors which are rendered textually in a range of typographical signs. The letter, widely popular both as narrative form and narrative device in the fiction of the period, is itself a sign of breath in its role as a substitute for speech. This role is powerfully expressed early in the century by Eloisa in Pope's verse epistle *Eloisa to Abelard*:

> Heav'n first taught letters for some wretch's aid,
> Some banish'd lover, or some captive maid;
> They live, they speak, they breathe what love inspires,
> Warm from the soul, and faithful to its fires,
> The virgin's wish without her fears impart,
> Excuse the blush, and pour out all the heart,
> Speed the soft intercourse from soul to soul,
> And waft a sigh from *Indus* to the *Pole*.[5]

Standing in for the 'banish'd lover' or 'captive maid', letters are said to 'live' and 'speak': most importantly for Eloisa, 'breath[ing] what love inspires', they communicate desire directly and fully, more fully indeed

than might be the case if the lovers met in person. The letter, in its love-inspired breath, pouring out the heart and wafting sighs around the globe, moves from 'soul to soul' transparently. Eloisa's description conjures up a kind of ideal letter, a letter that can ease the pain of a 'wretch' parted from his or her loved one by expressing desire directly, faithfully and without fear: this sentimental ideal of transparent epistolary sincerity is shown to be more complicated in practice by both Eloisa's own agonised verses and by Evelina's correspondence. Composition, it turns out, is not quite so natural as breathing, just as breathing, however natural it may be, is itself a culturally weighted process.

Tension between a conception of letter-writing as offering unparalleled direct access to the heart and a concern that such sincerity and transparency were potentially dangerous and needed regulation can be found frequently in eighteenth-century letter manuals, often resulting in contradictory advice. '[W]rite what your heart shall dictate', urges a correspondent to her niece in Lady Dorothea Du Bois' *The Lady's Polite Secretary* (1771), before giving 'another caution, which one would hardly think necessary did not daily experience convince us of the contrary, and that is, *never take up the pen till you have considered what you are going to write*.'[6] As Mary Favret has commented, 'When common consent granted the letter the power to convey "passion" in language, it also accused the letter of a lack of intrinsic control', and she goes on, 'In the words of a 1780 rhetoric book, the letter allowed its writer "to be at ease and give vent occasionally to the overflowings of his heart." At the same time, the rhetorician felt obliged to rein in the antisocial impulses of any correspondent […]'.[7] The book in this case is *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* by the literary scholar Hugh Blair, whose 'overflowings' of the heart recall the 'pouring out' of Eloisa's. Yet as Dorothea Du Bois' cautionary comment implies, there may be many reasons why writing the heart is problematic. In Evelina's case, the transparency of the letter is always compromised by the impossibility of explicitly acknowledging her own desire, which must be inferred by the reader but unclaimed by the letter-writer herself. When Lord Orville finally declares his love, Evelina writes:

> I attempt not to describe my sensations at that moment; I scarce breathed; I doubt if I existed,—the blood forsook my cheeks, and my feet refused to sustain me: Lord Orville, hastily rising, supported me to a chair, upon which I sunk, almost lifeless.

It is fitting that her collapse comes at the moment when Lord Orville protests the inadequacy of speech—she is 'dearer to [him] than speech has the power of telling!'—and significant that the remainder of their conversation, once Evelina has sufficiently recovered, is not given to the reader. 'I cannot', she tells Mr Villars, 'write the scene that followed, though every word is engraven on my heart' (351–52). Intimacy is unrepresentable, while the lifelessness that overtakes Evelina at the moment of Orville's declaration—the consummation of her desire—relates breathlessness and sex in the only way such a novel could (although with plenty of precedent in the experiences of earlier sentimental heroines, such as Eloisa and Pamela). As Bradford K. Mudge writes, romance novels in the late eighteenth century are 'dependent on the displacement and/or deferral of sexual passion' so that 'passion is at once central to the drama and almost entirely absent from the field of vision'.[8] Breathlessness in such novels is the repeated signifier of such an absent presence.

Just as Eloisa's heart is closely associated with breath and Evelina's breathlessness exposes the state of her heart, so Blair's use of the word 'vent' brings heart and lungs together and suggests the letter's important function of release, both emotional and physiological. In Johnson's *Dictionary*, the first meaning of 'vent' is 'A small aperture; a hole; a spiracle; passage at which any thing is let out'. 'Spiracle' is worth some attention: the *OED* defines it as

> 1. Breath, spirit. *Obs.* (the last example of its use is in 1654)
> 2. a. A small opening by which a confined space has communication with the outer air; *esp.* an air-hole or air-shaft.
> *b. spec.* An opening in the ground affording egress to subterranean vapours or fiery matter; a volcanic vent-hole.

Johnson's examples of the use of 'vent' with the meaning of 'spiracle' include the moment in *The Rape of the Lock* when Umbriel opens the 'wondrous bag' over the dejected heroine Belinda, slumped in the arms of her friend Thalestris:

> Full o'er their Heads the swelling Bag he rent,
> And all the Furies issued at the Vent. (IV, 91–92)

This bag, significantly, contains 'the Force of Female Lungs, / Sighs, Sobs, and Passions, and the War of Tongues' (IV, 83–84): breath, voice,

and tears.[9] The particular resonance of 'vent' in its relation to pent-up emotion, figured by the holding and releasing of the breath (and potentially by the writing and sending of letters), becomes clear. As the eponymous heroine of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) laments to her parents: '…to whom but you can I vent my Griefs, and keep my poor Heart from bursting!', while in his *Clarissa* (1748) the heroine's mother writes to Mrs Norton, 'My heart is full. Writing may give some vent to my griefs, and perhaps I may write what lies most upon my heart […]'[10] Evelina also needs to give 'free vent' to her feelings at one of the novel's key crisis points.

As with Blair's comment above, Pamela's lament and Mrs Harlowe's complaint point vividly to the relation between lungs and heart towards which Evelina's appreciation of Garrick's acting gestured. In classical physiology, there was an 'all-important linkage … of the two systems of blood flow and respiration' and the lungs acted in tandem with the heart, as Robert Erickson explains, quoting Plato's *Timaeus*:

> The lungs gave 'coolness and the power of respiration', alleviating the heat of the heart, and 'when passion was rife within, the heart, beating against a yielding body', was cooled and more ready to join with passion in the service of reason.[11]

The symbolic and physiological importance of the lungs had been recognised since the classical theories of Galen,[12] and classical ideas and associations still pertained in the eighteenth century, notwithstanding developments in medical understanding: for Blair, Pamela, and Mrs Harlowe, giving vent to emotions is presented as the lungs easing pressure on the heart, providing much-needed relief to the inflammations caused by various kinds of passion. Comprehending the operation of the breath physiologically was still a challenge at the time *Evelina* was written in 1778. Joseph Priestley's essay 'Observations on Respiration' of 1776 still laboured under the misconceptions caused by the phlogiston theory, not to be finally disentangled until Antoine Lavoisier published his *Traité élémentaire de chimie* in 1789. Still, whatever the confusions in the detail of their descriptions, what Edmund Goodwyn's 1788 study referred to as *The Connexion of Life with Respiration* encapsulated one of the key reasons for the fascination with the topic: breath and breathlessness were the essential symptoms of life and death. In a sample letter included in

The Universal Letter-Writer (1770), a clergyman reflects that 'The partition which separates time from eternity is nothing more than the breath of our nostrils, and the transition may be made in the least particle of time'.[13] Epistolary and sentimental literary techniques in the period were peculiarly attuned to the transition from breath to breathlessness and the challenges of representation it presented to writers.

Writing of Coleridge and Keats, Francis O'Gorman has commented that 'Poetry naturally has a close relationship with breath, and the late eighteenth-century writers who celebrated how poetry, even as it was printed, mimicked the spoken, the breath-born, were part of a long tradition'.[14] This tradition of interest in the way print mimics speech includes not only poetry but also the prose styles of the sentimental novel and epistolary fiction—very often, of course, overlapping genres. In their prioritisation of immediacy and their intent to engage the feelings of their readers, such texts made liberal use of punctuation to imitate the way lived experience and emotional pressure fractured and broke up speech. This applied particularly to the use of the letter in narrative, given its function as a substitute for the human voice. Richardson's *Pamela* illustrates this facet of sentimental fiction vividly. Early in the novel, after Mr B has sprung unexpectedly from the closet in the bedroom, Pamela writes to her parents:

> Wicked, wicked Man!—I have no Patience left me!—But yet, don't be frighted—for,—I hope—I hope, I am honest!—But if my Head and my Heart will let me, you shall hear all.—[15]

The dash, much favoured by sentimental novelists, here becomes an intensifier that adds extra weight to the already-intense exclamation mark. An indicator of breathless gaps in narration, the dash mirrors the disturbing gap in Pamela's consciousness, a gap that means she can only repeatedly 'hope', rather than 'know', that she is 'honest'.

The opening of Evelina's first letter from London is another, if rather different, case in point: 'This moment arrived. Just going to Drury-Lane theatre. The celebrated Mr. Garrick performs Ranger. I am quite in extacy. So is Miss Mirvan. How fortunate, that he should happen to play!' (27). Clipped and abbreviated, the sentences capture Evelina's excitement and hurry; the theatre beckoning, the letter draws to an end rapidly: 'I can write no more now. I have hardly time to breathe—only just this, the houses and streets are not quite so superb as I expected' (27). (The slight

bathos in that observation stands as a hint that London may not always come up to the young Evelina's high expectations.) It is not only Evelina's own letters that convey the breathlessness of strong emotion. Writing early in the novel, Mr Villars, Evelina's guardian, exclaims to his old friend Lady Howard, 'This letter will be delivered to you by my child, – the child of my adoption, – my affection!' (22). The dash here is again instrumental in raising the emotional temperature of the utterance, drawing attention to the complexities of Villars and Evelina's relationship in the qualification of 'child' by 'child of my adoption', qualified in its turn by 'my affection!'

The dash is only one of a group of ellipses increasingly employed in print as the eighteenth century progressed. In *Ellipsis in English Literature*, Ann Toner lists dots, dashes, series of hyphens and asterisks as the main ways texts in the period denoted varieties of pause, interruption or aposiopesis. Her book draws attention both to the way 'the novel has given rise to especially varied and innovative uses of the ellipsis' and to the particular relationship between sensibility and ellipsis:

> Sensibility became a pan-European language in that it rejected words where possible for the vocabulary of sighs, sobs and tears. That which 'punctures or interrupts speech', as John Mullan has described the vocabulary of sensibility, is needy of a visible counterpart to document such interruptions.[16]

Toner points out that '[A]ll punctuation provides guidance as to breathing', but in the literature of sensibility especially the ellipsis became a symbol of emotionally freighted breath—the sob, the sigh, the gasp, the swoon.

In *Evelina*, as in *Pamela*, moments of high emotional stress are consistently associated with breathlessness, figuring the extreme physiological pressure such emotion puts the body under, often in the form of multiple dashes. The stresses these signify are not simply emotional, however, but also and inextricably moral. One of the novel's most intense crisis points, Evelina's first meeting with her estranged father, Sir John Belmont, illustrates the role of ellipsis in the rendering of sentimental breathing with particular clarity. Her likeness to her wronged mother triggers an acute reaction in Sir John, whose emotion is produced by his intense feelings of guilt at his mistreatment of the dead Caroline Evelyn:

> 'Yes, yes,' cried he, looking earnestly in my face, 'I see, I see thou art her child! she lives—she breathes—she is present to my view!—Oh God, that she indeed lived!—Go, child, go,' added he, wildly starting, and pushing me from him, 'take her away, Madam,—I cannot bear to look at her!' And then, breaking hastily from me, he rushed out of the room. (372)

Such moments in the novel not only mimicked the breathlessness of the characters represented, they also induced breathlessness in their readers, as contemporary reports made clear to Burney: 'Thou hast made thy old Father Laugh & Cry at thy pleasure', Dr Burney told her;[17] 'Lady Hales told Susan [Burney's sister Susanna] how she had "been reading Evelina to Madame de Ferre, the Governess, & the children, & that the meeting with the Father made them all *sob* so much, she was obliged to leave it off"'.[18] Such effects can be seen as typifying what Annamarie Jagose describes as 'that sympathetic connection between character and reader that underwrites the eighteenth-century sentimental novel's program of improvement'.[19] In its approving review of *Evelina*, the *Critical Review* implied just such a direct link between identification with a character and beneficial moral effects. It imagined a father recommending the novel to his daughters for its 'knowledge of the world and lessons of experience':

> they will weep and (what it is not so commonly the effect of novels) will laugh, and grow wiser, as they read; the experienced mother will derive pleasure and happiness from being present at its reading; even the sons of the family will forego the diversions of the town or the field to pursue the entertainment of Evelina's acquaintance, who will imperceptibly lead them, as well as their sisters, to improvement and to virtue.[20]

Thus the process of moral improvement is explicitly bound up with physiological reactions to the sentimental text ('they will weep and […] will laugh, and grow wiser'), underlining the continuity between mind and body that was becoming of such importance both in medical and philosophical thinking and in the popular imagination as the eighteenth century progressed.[21]

This intertwining of the moral and the physiological—again, specifically the operation of breath—is especially clear in *Evelina* when the heroine believes that Mr Macartney, the despised and impoverished lodger of her vulgar relations the Branghtons, is about to attempt suicide. She tells Mr Villars:

> In a moment, strength and courage seemed lent me as by inspiration: I started, and rushing precipitately into the room, just caught his arm, and then, overcome by my own fears, I fell down at his side, breathless and senseless. (183)

Her recovery from this swoon is 'almost instantaneous', however, and she seizes the pistols and takes them away:

> The moment I reached again the room I had so fearfully left, I threw away the pistols, and flinging myself on the first chair, gave free vent to the feelings I had most painfully stifled, in a violent burst of tears, which indeed, proved a happy relief to me. (184)

Here we see again the way in which pent-up emotion needs release. As before, physiology is intimately bound up with emotion, and emotion leads to morally significant action: it is 'inspiration'—breath as spirit—that leads Evelina to act as she does, and the force of this lends her courage to act to protect Macartney, resulting in the brief breathless swoon. Once she has disposed of the pistols, the operation of breath in relation to emotion is graphically expressed in the 'vent' given by tears to her feelings.

The rapid transitions in this episode and the fears Evelina has for Macartney return us to the intrinsic involvement of breath and breathlessness in matters of life and death. 'Breathless' here means in a faint, but it was as commonly used in eighteenth-century sentimental literature as a synonym for 'dead'.[22] When, for example, Pamela contemplates suicide by the pond's edge, she imagines that 'when they see the dead Corpse of the unhappy *Pamela* dragg'd out to these slopy Banks, and lying breathless at their Feet, they will find that Remorse to wring their obdurate Hearts, which now has no Place there!'.[23] In Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* of 1771, Old Edwards gazes 'on the breathless remains' of Harley at the novel's close.[24] Eighteenth-century usage included the meaning 'out of breath', and 'breathless' is also frequently employed in this way, but the potential danger of breathlessness is brought closer by the dual uses of the word, as *The Man of Feeling* shows. Upset on hearing that his beloved Miss Walton is to be married, Harley ruminates in his garden and is then concerned to see 'a servant, with a knot of ribbands in his hat, go into the house'.[25] Thinking this is a messenger from the Waltons with news of the engagement, he hastens to find out, but

> When he approached the door of the kitchen where he supposed the man had entered, his heart throbbed so violently, that when he would have called Peter, his voice failed in the attempt. He stood a moment listening in this breathless state of palpitation: […][26]

The inter-relation of heart and lungs is illustrated beautifully in this passage—the throbbing of Harley's heart prevents speech. Again, the way voice and breath are bound up together is key. In his susceptibility to such suspension of action, the man of feeling's early demise is anticipated.

One of the defining features of the sentimental protagonist, as with Harley in this passage, is the degree to which sensibility disables them from taking action: the death-like swoon that overtakes Pamela, Evelina, and many other heroines of sensibility (as well as some heroes) is the ultimate example of this powerlessness. The effect of breathlessness on the voice, preventing or distorting utterance, is part of this suspension of the will, an effect with potentially dangerous consequences in certain circumstances. Evelina, led into the 'dark walks' at Vauxhall Gardens by the foolish and imprudent Branghton sisters, runs panic-stricken from one party of intimidating gentlemen into another:

> I was almost distracted with terror, and so breathless with running, that I could not speak, till another [man] advancing, said, I was as handsome as an angel, and desired to be of the party. I then just articulated, 'For Heaven's sake, Gentlemen, let me pass!'
>
> Another, then, rushing suddenly forward, exclaimed, 'Heaven and earth! what voice is that?—'
>
> 'The voice of the prettiest little actress I have seen this age,' answered one of my persecutors.
>
> 'No,—no,—no,—'I *panted out*, 'I am no actress, pray let me go,—pray let me pass—.' (197–98)

Barely articulate, panting, Evelina's breathless entreaties seem unlikely to move her persecutors, but she is rescued by the fortuitous appearance of Sir Clement—a persecutor more familiar to her. Sir Clement takes her away from the threatening crowd, but attempts to steer her into 'another of the dark alleys', '"Where"', as he explains, '"we shall be least observed"' (198). As she realises what he is doing, Evelina's feelings undergo a metamorphosis from terror to anger, physiologically experienced: she tells how her 'heart beat with resentment', and she demands 'how he dared treat [her] with such insolence'. Part of Sir Clement's

problem throughout the novel is that he cannot place Evelina socially: is she a young lady of birth or is she a nobody? Can he assault her with impunity or does she have an army of protectors at her back? Finding her alone in the dark walks, he implies, is tantamount to confirming her social nullity and sexual availability. Evelina tells her reader that she is '[e]xtremely offended at this speech', and doesn't 'deign' to answer, instead walking on 'towards that part of the garden whence I perceived lights and company':

> 'So you will not explain to me your situation?' said he, at length.
> 'No, Sir,' answered I, disdainfully.
> 'Nor yet—suffer me to make my own interpretation?—'
> I could not bear this strange manner of speaking; it made my very soul shudder,—and I burst into tears. (199)

The pattern of high emotion followed by the relief of tears that we saw in the scene of Macartney's supposed attempted suicide, just a little earlier in the novel, is repeated, but the tears she sheds in this later scene are tears of mortification and of anger, not of fear or grief—a different kind of 'venting'—and her indignation has the effect of successfully reducing Sir Clement to the position of breathless suppliant:

> 'O Miss Anville—loveliest of women—forgive my—my—I beseech you forgive me;—if I have offended,—if I have hurt you—I could kill myself at the thought!—' (199)

The power dynamics of this scene are always interesting: Evelina's deliverer becomes her persecutor, from whom she effectively delivers herself. Mary Favret regards *Evelina* as 'the epitome' of the sentimental epistolary novel in English, using the term 'memoir-letter' to characterise its method.[27] Of the form more generally, she writes: 'the memoir-letter encourages resignation. The form produces and foregrounds the letter-writer's vulnerability, her lack of self-determination, and her ineffectual role in events […] The form thus seems to foster the victimization of the ingenuous letter-writer.'[28] Given Evelina's precarious social position and the way she seems frequently to be at the mercy of characters more forceful, selfish, and powerful than she, be it Captain Mirvan, Sir Clement, or Madame Duval and the Branghtons, such a reading of the form can seem persuasive. Yet Betty Rizzo urges that 'Too much has been

made of the "passivity" of both Burney and Evelina', contending that Evelina 'has a distinguished sense of self, the ability […] to act against convention'.[29] Rizzo identifies 'at least three times' when Evelina takes independent action, in relation to Macartney and her father; her successful management of Sir Clement at Vauxhall could be added to this list, as she moves from breathless inarticulacy to a combination of indignant self-defence and deliberate withholding of speech. There is admittedly a distinct limit to Evelina's power in this case, however. Sir Clement characteristically turns suppliance into coercion and, she tells Mr Villars, 'besought me to forgive him, with such earnestness of supplication, that, merely to escape his importunities, I was forced to speak', though 'with a very ill grace' (200)—but nevertheless by this time she has almost got herself back to the safety of the 'general crowd', and the energy she exhibits in the scene is very far from the stasis experienced by Harley in *The Man of Feeling*, just as the rapidity with which she recovers from her swoon enables her to remove the pistols from Macartney's room. Furthermore, her energy in both these cases is morally directed: where the sexual threat of the amorphous group of young men elicits a visceral 'terror' that renders Evelina breathless and powerless, Sir Clement's duplicity and lack of honour arouse her sense of justice and her pride, while the imminence of the apparent threat to Macartney requires immediate action to preserve life.

It is no coincidence that the three episodes identified by Rizzo in which Evelina acts for herself are all also episodes of intense emotional investment and moral significance in which breath plays a notable role. One of these is Macartney's apparent suicide attempt. The other two are Evelina's decision to meet Macartney at the garden gate in Clifton and her refusal to leave her father when he commands her to do so, in order to effect a reconciliation with him. These instances of independent action are far from straightforward, however, and the conflicting pressures involved are signalled by the fractured and breathless exchanges that take place between the principal actors in the scenes.

Having met Macartney by accident outside Mrs Beaumont's house in Clifton early one morning, Evelina impulsively agrees to meet him there again the following day, partly hurried into doing so by the unexpected presence of Lord Orville, who has come to bring her in to breakfast. It is a decision she rapidly regrets, especially on seeing Orville's surprise, and one she attempts to reverse: she writes cancelling the appointment as

politely as she can, mindful of Macartney's 'peculiar situation, his misfortunes, his sadness, and, […] the idea I knew he entertained of what he calls his obligations to me' (300). When the letter cannot be delivered, she reluctantly concludes it is 'incumbent upon me to keep my word' and sets out to meet Macartney, but the meeting never takes place because Lord Orville—deliberately, we are to understand—is also out for an early morning stroll:

> […] uncertain whether I was wrong or right, it was with fear and trembling that I opened the garden-gate,—judge, then, of my feelings, when the first object I saw was Lord Orville!—he, too, looked extremely disconcerted, and said, in a hesitating manner, 'Pardon me, Madam,—I did not intend,—I did not imagine you would have been here so soon,—or,—or I would not have come.'—And then, with a hasty bow, he passed me, and proceeded to the garden.
>
> I was scarce able to stand, so greatly did I feel myself shocked; but, upon my saying, almost involuntarily, 'Oh my Lord!'—he turned back, and, after a short pause, said, 'Did you speak to *me*, Madam?'
>
> I could not immediately answer; I seemed *choaked*, and was even forced to support myself by the garden-gate. (302)

Evelina's anxiety about whether she is doing the right thing becomes paralysing here. The consternation, however, is to some extent mutual, and the net result of this encounter is that Evelina does *not* go through with her plan to meet Macartney. It shows her trying to think for herself in order to discern the right course of action, but this does not result in a clear-cut decision. Instead, the episode underscores both the interconnections between emotional, moral, and physiological discernment and the difficulties involved in properly interpreting their signals.

The third of Rizzo's decisive actions—Evelina's refusal to leave her father's presence despite his commands—is similarly complicated. The first meeting between father and daughter ended as we have seen above, with Sir John Belmont rushing in disorder from the room. The second meeting almost ends in the same way, with Sir John crying 'passionately', '"go, go! […] in pity—in compassion,—if thou valuest my senses, leave me,—and for ever!"' (383). Evelina, 'greatly terrified', cries '"I will, I will!"', moving 'hastily towards the door', but

> stopping when I reached it, and, almost involuntarily, dropping on my knees, 'Vouchsafe,' cried I, 'oh, Sir, vouchsafe but once to bless your daughter, and her sight shall never more offend you!' (383)

This action, which leads to a 'soften[ing]' of Sir John's voice and an extended, highly charged conversation in which father and daughter are properly reconciled, is 'almost involuntary' and its breathlessness is signalled in the punctuation—in the dashes of Sir John's passionate cry and in the exclamation marks and commas of Evelina's response. This barely intentional action suggests an instinctive moral discernment at an emotional and physiological level, as is the case, indeed, with the Macartney episode.

Many have noted that *Evelina* can be seen as a species of *Bildungsroman*, and Rizzo sees it as presenting a process of maturation that makes Evelina worthy of Orville, a process encouraged by Villars' exhortation that she must 'learn not only to *judge*, but to *act*' for herself.[30] Evelina's actions at key moments do not seem to allow for a division of human behaviour into judging and acting, however; rather they involve a visceral impulse that links them to the notion of a moral sense as developed by Francis Hutcheson, for whom such a sense operated precisely in advance of rational reflection. In his *Inquiry into the Originals of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), he instances celebrated English and German philosophers to ask rhetorically,

> must a Man have the Reflection of CUMBERLAND or PUFENDORF, to admire Generosity, Faith, Humanity, Gratitude? Or reason so nicely to apprehend the Evil in Cruelty, Treachery, Ingratitude? Do not the former excite our Admiration, and Love, and Study of Imitation, wherever we see them, almost at first View, without any such Reflection, and the latter, our Contempt, and Abhorrence?[31]

Rather than providing evidence of maturation, then, Evelina's actions to save Macartney and to reconcile with her father could be argued to encapsulate such an almost instantaneous recognition, perceiving 'almost at first View, without any […] Reflection' the essential moral value of both Macartney's life and the bond between father and daughter. The problem of whether to meet Macartney at the garden gate is more genuinely a dilemma (Orville calls it 'a point so delicate' [299]), since there are competing priorities—letting down the distressed and vulnerable

Macartney and the imperative of keeping his secrets versus the impropriety of meeting a man illicitly and unchaperoned. In this case, Evelina's natural impulses pull her in opposing directions, resulting in paralysis, while in the other two instances fundamental values—the preservation of life and the filial bond—override all other considerations and spur her to act.

Considering the representation of breath and breathlessness in *Evelina* leads to a greater understanding of their centrality, hitherto underappreciated, in the construction of the essential features of the sentimental protagonist in the eighteenth century. It also draws attention to the particular role breath plays in the protagonist's capacity to act. Breathlessness becomes not simply the standard marker of sentimental incapacity, of paralysis, but also the signifier of intense and instinctive moral discernment of the kind described by Hutcheson and which, in certain circumstances of crisis, is the vital condition for action. Literary sensibility has long been seen by critics as bound up with philosophical developments of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the link between breathlessness and moral discernment is a further and useful refinement of this connection.[32] It also contributes to a revision of the view that the heroine of epistolary fiction more generally, and Evelina in particular, is purely passive—done to, rather than doing. Instead, she emerges as actively involved in numerous scenarios that at once challenge her capacity for moral conduct and allow her to demonstrate her power to act.

Notes

1. Frances Burney, *Evelina*, ed. by Edward A. Bloom and intro. by Vivien Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 27.
2. Samuel Richardson, letter to Lady Bradshaigh, 14 February 1754, quoted in Tom Keymer, *Richardson's 'Clarissa' and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 73. For discussions of 'writing to the moment' and epistolary immediacy, see for example Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 123–24; Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), 85–87; Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa and the Eighteenth-Century Reader*, 1–15, and Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 54–59.
3. See *OED* meanings 1(b) 'The shock felt on the chest-wall when the heart beats'; 3(a) 'Formerly, esp., A strong suggestion supposed to come

from a good or evil spirit' and 3(c) 'Sudden or involuntary inclination or tendency to act, without premeditation or reflection'.

4. See for example Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Robert Erickson, *The Language of the Heart, 1600–1750* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and George Rousseau, *Nervous Acts: Essays on Literature, Culture, and Sensibility* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
5. Alexander Pope, *Eloisa to Abelard* (51–58), in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. by John Butt (1963; London: Routledge, 1989). Further references to Pope are to this edition. Laura Alexander points out a similar passage in John Hughes's *Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (1713), a great influence on Pope ('"Breathings of the Heart": Reading Sensibility in Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*', *New Perspectives on the Eighteenth Century* 3/1 (Spring 2006): 34–35).
6. Lady Dorothea Du Bois, *The Lady's Polite Secretary; or, the New Female Letter Writer* (London: J. Coote and T. Evans, 1771), 8.
7. Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24, quoting Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 14th edn (London: T. Caddell, et al., 1825), 496.
8. Bradford K. Mudge, *The Whore's Story: Women, Pornography, and the British Novel, 1684–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 218.
9. A sob is defined in the *OED* as 'a convulsive catching of the breath under the influence of grief'.
10. Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, ed. by Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 60; *Clarissa*, ed. by Angus Ross (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 583.
11. Erickson, *The Language of the Heart*, 1–2.
12. As Clark Lawlor explains in *Consumption and Literature: The Making of the Romantic Disease* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 'Galen conceptualised the lungs as the part of the body where food, transformed by the liver into blood with natural spirit, became infused with air or vital spirit (a form of *pneuma* or life force). Vital spirits would then flow to the brain—which would use it to make animal spirits to enable motion—and the rest of the body. Breath was life, both spiritual and physical. Galen's ideas appealed to the Christian ages to follow because his vitalistic ideas of an animating life force were easily transformable into a non-pagan concept of the soul' (18).
13. Thomas Cooke, *The Universal Letter-Writer; or, New Art of Polite Correspondence* (London: J. Cooke, 1770[?]), 147.

14. Francis O'Gorman, 'Coleridge, Keats, and the Science of Breathing', *Essays in Criticism* 61/4 (October 2011), 366.
15. Richardson, *Pamela*, 60.
16. Ann Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21 and 84, quoting John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 61. As Toner points out, one of the challenges in interpreting ellipses in printed works is that 'Decisions relating to these features are more often in the domain of publishers and printers than authors. Punctuation seems precariously exposed to non-authorial management in a way that word choices are not' (15). For an example of an eighteenth-century author's close involvement with the minutiae of presentation, see Joe Bray's '"Attending to the *minute*": Richardson's revision of italics in *Pamela*' in *Ma(r)king the Text: The Presentation of Meaning on the Literary Page*, ed. by Joe Bray, Miriam Handley and Anne C. Henry (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000). A further difficulty in the literary analysis of many eighteenth-century texts is that manuscripts were commonly disposed of by the printer after publication. In the case of *Evelina*, however, a portion of an early manuscript does survive. Joyce Hemlow's comparison of passages of the manuscript with the printed text suggests a reduction of the use of the dash in keeping with the general trend of revisions that included the 'tightening of the sentence structure [and] replacing of direct, artless, and informal effect by one of greater finish, dignity, and elegance' (Joyce Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958], 80). While it is impossible to be certain, the placing of dashes in the published novel does therefore seem likely to be Burney's own.
17. Madame D'Arblay [Frances Burney], *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* (London: Edward Moxon, 1832), vol. 1, 148, quoted in Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney*, 97.
18. *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. by Lars E. Troide and Stewart Cooke (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), vol. 3, 31, quoted in Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney*, 97. This anecdote recalls Aaron Hill's account of the little boy whose 'Succession of heart-heaving Sobs' on hearing read aloud the scene from *Pamela* when the heroine contemplates suicide at the pond's edge confirmed him as 'the youngest of *Pamela's Converts*' (Richardson, *Pamela*, Appendix 1, 515).
19. Annamarie Jagose, '"Critical Extasy": Orgasm and Sensibility in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32/2 (2007), 473.
20. *Critical Review*, 46 (1778), 202–203.
21. See Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel*, 8–15, for a discussion of the often loose relationship between developing scientific

understandings of physiology and the popular deployment of physiological terms in the literature of sensibility.

22. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the meanings of 'breathless' as '1. a. Without breath; b. Lifeless, dead; c. *Grammar* Unaspirated; 2. a. Breathing with difficulty, panting (as a result of swift running or violent exercise); out of breath, exhausted, spent; b. Holding one's breath, as with awe, expectation, excitement; 3. Unstirred by a breath of wind'.
23. Richardson, *Pamela*, 172.
24. Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. by Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 131.
25. Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, 109.
26. Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, 110.
27. Favret (*Romantic Correspondence*, 229, n. 24) explains that the term derives from Vivienne Mylne, *The Eighteenth-Century French Novel: Techniques of Illusion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), 150–51 and François Jost, '"L'Evolution d'un genre: le roman epistolaire dans les lettres occidentales"', in *Essais de littérature comparée* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968), vol. 2, 124–25.
28. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence*, 63.
29. Betty Rizzo, *Companions Without Vows: Relationships Among Eighteenth-Century British Women* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 88, 109.
30. Rizzo, *Companions Without Vows*, 88; Burney, *Evelina*, 166. For considerations of *Evelina* as *Bildungsroman*, see for example Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) and Emily Allen, 'Staging Identity: Frances Burney's Allegory of Genre', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31/4 (Summer 1998): 433–51.
31. Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725; London: R. Ware, et al., 1753), 120. Hutcheson is one of the key philosophers of the Benevolist School whose writings underpin many aspects of the culture of sensibility. His belief in a moral instinct was developed from Shaftesbury's work, but it was rejected by later thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith. See John Dussinger, *The Discourse of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 47–49.
32. See for example John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) and Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

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